

LACE: using a MOOC for regular networked curricula

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Abstract

Literature and Change in Europe (LACE) is a network of seven institutions providing a common master course on Literature. Each of the partner institutions provide a module to the course, which is followed jointly by students at their respective institutions, collaborating over the web. LACE involves also physical mobility by teachers.

In 2013 we launched LACE for the first time as a MOOC on the publicly available platform Canvas.net, where it is followed both by the regular, registered students at the participating universities as well as MOOC subscribers. The course provides peer interaction through assignments and forum discussions. Students who fulfill certain conditions receive a Certificate of Accomplishment. With this pilot we want to explore the interaction of MOOC subscribers and the regular university students, programmes and facilities. Lead partner is KU Leuven, Belgium. In this paper we will document our motivations, choices and the first experiences in setting up this pilot.

Keywords

Networked Curriculum, Virtual Student Mobility, Teacher Mobility, KU Leuven, MOOC, Canvas.net

1. Introduction

This paper aims to outline the process of transforming an existing networked curriculum course, LACE, into a MOOC: <https://www.canvas.net/courses/literature-and-change-in-europe>. The course 'Literature And Change in Europe' (LACE – <http://drupal.arts.kuleuven.be/lace>) is a joint program offered by seven European universities, each of them offering content for a separate module in the course.

The LACE course used to run on the Moodle platform, not only to deliver the content but also to make interaction between students and teachers possible. Seen from this perspective one could say that the LACE course was already a mini-MOOC. The students, all regular students at one of the participating institutions, worked together in international groups on tasks in the Moodle environment.

In a first part of this paper we describe the past and current situation of the LACE course as it was to the decision of developing it into a MOOC. Next we outline our arguments to make LACE into a MOOC and the reasons for choosing to work with Canvas as a platform to offer it. This new MOOC context means that both students who are registered university students as well as unregistered MOOC subscribers are interacting at the same time in the same environment, working jointly on assignments. By writing an extra essay, regular university students can earn their credits for the course that in their institution is considered equivalent with the MOOC. The final part of this paper describes our first experiences with the MOOC at the time of writing.

2. The LACE Network

The faculty of Arts at KU Leuven (<http://www.arts.kuleuven.be>) has a long history in international collaboration. By joining the LACE group, seven European Universities have connected to uplift their collaboration to a higher level. Addressing literature and art as cultural practices, LACE foregrounds the dynamics of tradition and innovation driving these practices. The cooperation focuses in particular on the following issues:

The interaction of literature and other arts (film, new media arts, theatre) with other regimes of representation, such as the discourses of science, religion, philosophy and politics, and their alternative regimes of rationality;

Innovations in literature and the arts in response to technological challenges and opportunities, as well as to new media (both in the past and in present culture); the invention of practices of remediation and intermediality;

The social responsibility and relevance conferred to literature and the other arts: this involves the investigation not just of their genres and forms, but also of their institutional conditions, of the forms of social agency which they allow, as well as of the value systems that they imply, or that underlie the ways these practices are legitimized. It also includes the analysis of the forms of ethics, ideology, and rationality that literature and other art disciplines present and foster, an analysis that takes into account the difference of artistic mediation, compared to the discourses of science, religion, philosophy and politics.

The development of theoretical and methodological perspectives that allow to address these issues: it is an explicit objective of LACE to strengthen the theoretical reflection and methodology within literary, cultural and arts studies, taking into account relevant developments both in these and in adjacent fields (in particular, in the sociology of arts and culture, and in cognitive sciences).

Defending a multilingual and cross-cultural approach that reflects the cooperation between institutions from diverse regions of Europe, and focusing on both continuities and discontinuities in European cultural history against the backdrop of exchanges with the 'Tout-Monde' (Edouard Glissant), a globalized world undergoing an intense process of cross-fertilization and creolization, LACE strives to document and analyse the ways in which the arts - broadly conceived - contribute to western culture's self-reflection.

2.1. Main principles of the collaboration

From the beginning the project was founded on a strong personal acquaintance and understanding amongst the participating members. Relying on the use of information and communication technologies was an evident choice. It is our strong belief that the use of Open and Distance Learning technologies and a policy on Open Education Resources are the decisive enabling factors to reach these goals. Three ingredients are deemed crucial for a successful realization of the project:

- **Transparent information:** to stimulate students to take one semester at one of the other participating institutions, it is imperative that students are clearly informed about all the details of their semester abroad. A long tradition in dealing with both inbound and outgoing Erasmus students has strengthened our view that very explicit information on each administrative step and the many social issues involved are well documented.
- **Open Courses:** an integral part of the solution was, from the beginning, to put the courses of the participating programmes online so that students could follow what was going on from anywhere, and could get a quite precise idea of which course they would want to take abroad. We used Moodle since it allowed in a very transparent way, not only to show the content, but also the whole workflow and activities involved in a course. Through these open Moodle courses, students have a virtual portfolio of the different courses that are available in the consortium, which in a second phase, we hope, will help to attract students from outside the consortium. Our first course online is 'Film and Literature', a collaboration between the university of Leuven and the university of

Granada. To simplify the cooperation we not only offer the full course material online, we also film all colleges in Leuven to offer them to the students abroad through web colleges in Moodle.

- Interactive workspace: student activities must also find their way online, so that students can truly interact not only with students abroad but also with their home base. Extensive use of Skype, videoconferencing and the Drupal CMS enables us to maintain multimode communications throughout the curriculum. How technology place a crucial role in all this, is explained extensively in chapter three. It provides us indispensable tools to create an interactive workspace, for students as well as for staff.

2.2. Partners

As stated above, seven European universities are contributing to the LACE Network. KU Leuven, Belgium, took the initiative for the consortium in 2009, under the impulse of project leader Prof. Dr. Jan Baetens. Until now the central communication and administration point for LACE is done by a project collaborator CS/Media centre of the Institute for Cultural Studies at KU Leuven (<http://www.kuleuven.be>). The other partners are

- Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, The Netherlands (<http://www.rug.nl>)
- Universidad de Granada, Spain (<http://www.ugr.es>)
- Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal (<http://www.ul.pt>)
- Aarhus Universitet, Denmark (<http://www.au.dk>)
- University of Bologna, Italy (<http://www.eng.unibo.it>)
- University of Tartu, Estonia (<http://www.ut.ee/en>)

3. Turning LACE into a MOOC

3.1. Motivation

The LACE course as it has been so far includes the potential to become a MOOC. For several years now the LACE network can count on experiences with blended, open and distance learning. Given the fact that the LACE course is in the first place a virtual community of teachers and students, it was a small step from there to become a MOOC. The advantage of offering our students a MOOC compared to the regular LACE course using Moodle, is the fact that the aspect 'learning from and with peer students' is more elaborated in a MOOC. As we have seen before in the Moodle, students are very willing to learn from and with each other and to make their learning process a social, interactive and to process the knowledge at a higher level in comparison to the students who receive contents ex cathedra. We have seen students writing almost full length papers using the discussion forum of the LACE Moodle. The possibility that a student 'meets' a fellow student in a discussion forum with whom an intellectual relation could be built up, is statistically larger when the group of students is larger, whereas in the regular LACE course we had only 25 students. All this made us confident that the MOOC would be a learning platform with more impact on the learning process than the regular LACE course was before.

The MOOC is also supposed to give much more visibility to the LACE consortium as a whole, attracting to our programmes at the different partner universities interested and qualified students. In this sense, we are already studying possibilities to give a credit path for MOOC subscribers who would be interested. With the MOOC, we think we even better reach our goal of 'internationalization' in the sense that the student mix will be even broader than the one obtained by collaborating between universities. Our original intention was to work out student mobility in an Erasmus Mundus programme. We backtracked on that and chose to focus on physical mobility for the teachers involved and initial virtual mobility by the students through the MOOC.

Of course, a successful experience with the MOOC hopefully encourages students to more actively consider physical mobility to one of our partner campuses.

3.2. The platform choice: Canvas.net

After we decided to make LACE into a MOOC, there was the obvious question which platform to choose. Several arguments were of importance when deciding to work with Canvas.net.

First of all there was the fact that we already had some experiences in Canvas using the 'Canvas by Instructure' platform. This platform is openly available to individual teachers who want to offer an online course. By using Instructure for our first tryouts, we noticed that the platform fulfilled our needs in online education: it is a platform that can be used intuitively, with a clear design. One does not need advanced computer or technical skills in order to get the job done in Canvas. A strong advantage of Canvas is the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) support, which allows easy integration of external tools and connection to social media and repositories. Another argument was more of a practical issue. Since the LACE course is a joint course, not provided by one single university, our options were rather limited. Platforms such as EdX and Coursera only work with single institutions, whereas LACE is a community of several European professors, each doing research in a similar domain, with the ambition to teach together in one course. The negotiation phase with Canvas was easy, we signed an institutional MOU and an instructor release. The intake focused on our readiness to deliver the course timely and in optimal conditions, not on finances nor legal issues.

A third reason we chose to work with Canvas.net platform is the rich portfolio they have: Canvas offers a wide range of topics when it comes to MOOCs. Some of the competing platforms have a more pronounced orientation, with less content stemming from the Humanities.

3.3. Other choices made

We had to make some clear choices on how to structure the course. We opted for a rather classic approach, with extensive weblectures offered in a sequential, hierarchical order and written out course texts or articles.

The interactivity focuses on forum discussions, where students are asked to post lecture summaries and are required to react to at least two other students, which makes the discussion ongoing. There are also some multiple choice tests ('quizzes') which are not only valuable for students to check to what extent they meet the learning outcomes, but also for us, MOOC providers, to gather monitoring data and learning analytics on who is actively participating in the course and who is dropping out.

Since we wanted to limit the extra support burden for the teaching staff, a teaching assistant follows up the forum discussions and alerts the teachers when intervention is required. Also the transfer from the resources on the Moodle platform to the Canvas platform was done by the teaching assistant. Since the educational resources were already part of the Moodle platform, there was no extra time investment needed to produce them.

We did put a lot of effort in making clear the learning goals and the expected learning outcomes.

4. First experiences

4.1. Participants in the course

Before the MOOC started we asked subscribers to fill in a survey in order to get an overview on the characteristics of our student group. We see a clear majority of relative young participants: over 70% is between 19 and 34 years old.

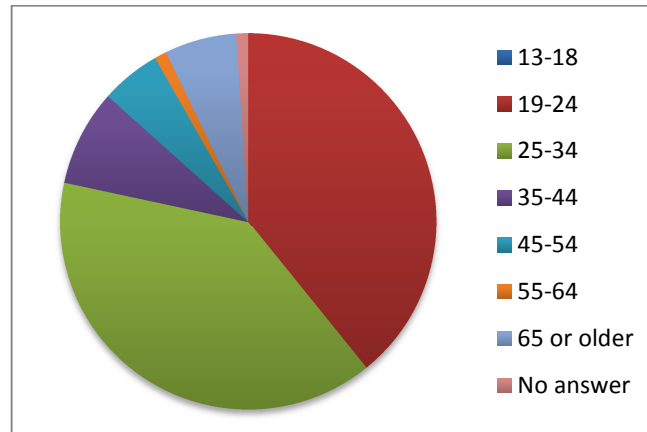


Fig.1: #LACE13 MOOC participants' age

Most of the participants are women, which is not different from the population in regular literature courses at universities worldwide.

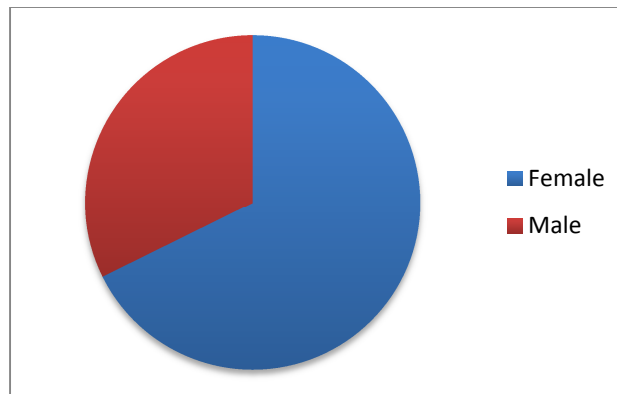


Fig.2: #LACE13 MOOC participants' gender

Given the topic of the course (European literature) it is not surprising that the majority of participants origins from the western part of Europe.

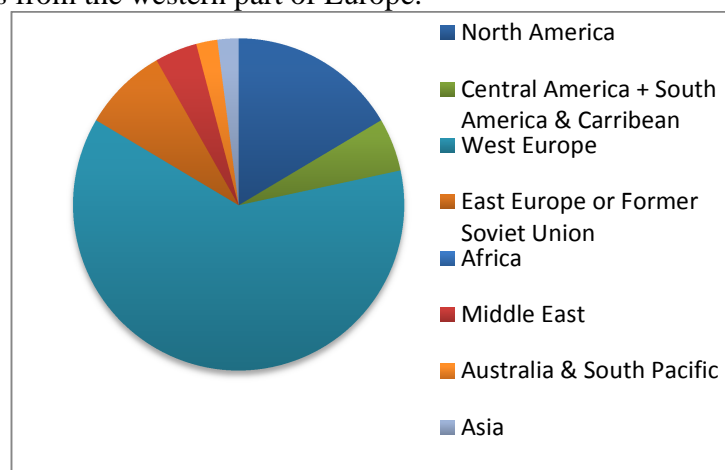


Fig. 3: #LACE13 MOOC participants' region of origin

As can be seen in the graph below, most of the participants already finished a degree in higher education, whether it is a Bachelor's or a Master's degree. From the forum we know that most of the participants already had been taking one or more courses in Literature, whether it was European literature or not.

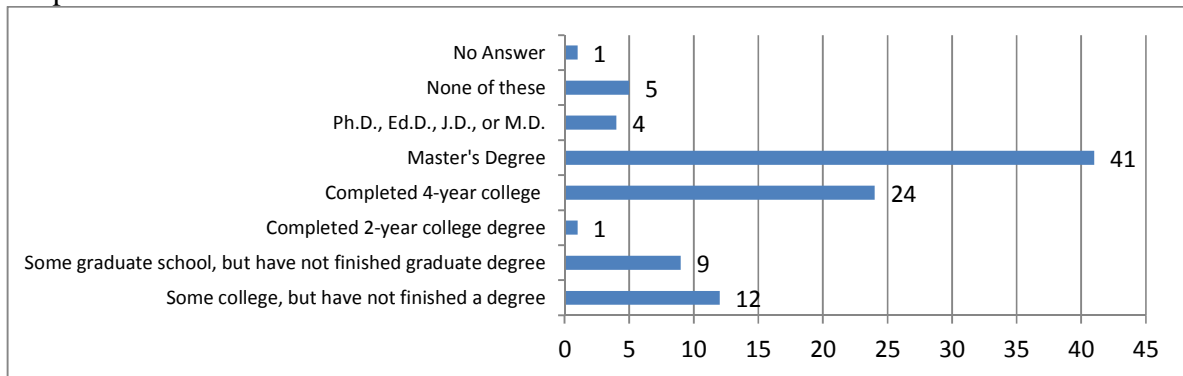


Fig. 4: #LACE13 MOOC participants' education prior to the MOOC

Participants had to answer the question "Why are you taking this MOOC?" (multiple answers were possible). The fourth bar is particularly interesting: only 54% of the participants join this course with the ambition to finish it. This puts dropout numbers in a different perspective.

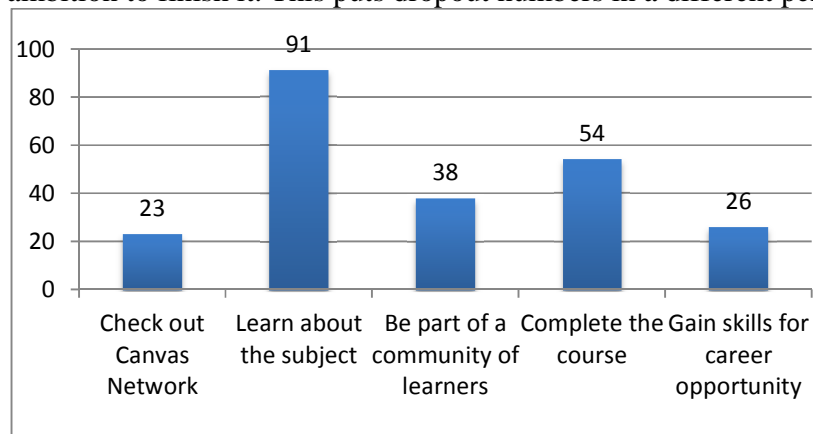


Fig. 5: participants' motivation to take the #LACE13 MOOC.

4.2. Experiences with the Canvas.net MOOC platform

As stated above our first experiences in both the Canvas Instructure and the Canvas.net environment are positive. We are pleased with its design and features, such as the possibility to easily record and implement videos in your course using a webcam, without leaving the platform itself. The contact with the Canvas support people was very productive and efficient. We were clearly advised on what to do and what not, and Canvas also offers a dedicated forum to share experiences and organizes instructive online workshops for course builders. Since we already had a completely worked out course with weblectures that ran on Moodle for several years, we of course had some head start, so the transition went smoothly.

4.3. Student experiences in this MOOC

As expected not everything went perfectly in this tryout MOOC. First of all we noticed that the current recordings (often 45 minutes) are too long for the MOOC format. We might reconsider

this for the next edition of our MOOC. The course also presupposes some extensive reading, which might not be feasible to every participant. A third issue we have to take into account next year is the fact that this year not all of the reading materials were freely available online. Some of the articles and texts origin from scientific journals who do not permit free distribution of their materials. This posed a problem for MOOC students not having access to a scientific library.

4.4. Guiding a MOOC: communication with students

More than in a traditional course context it is important to communicate explicitly about the metadata of the course: what prior knowledge do you presume as a teacher? Which learning goals are you trying to reach? What are the learning activities you expect students to do? How will they be assessed and what are the requirements to receive a certificate, if there is one? All those questions have to be addressed in what we referred to as the “study guide”. And although we put a lot of effort in creating this guide, these were exactly the kind of questions we received the most.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion we might state that this first edition of our MOOC was a relative success which will certainly be repeated in 2014. Both students and staff enjoy working in the MOOC in this student group that is complemented by students not being officially registred at one of the universities. The diversity that follows from this situation seemed to be enriching, just as we expected it to be.

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